

"Restructuring" in Historical Perspective: Tinkering toward Utopia

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As U.S. education enters the 1990s, *restructuring* has become a magic incantation. A colleague who discusses education reform with businessmen says that when she describes the everyday realities of life in classrooms, their eyes glaze over, but when she mentions restructuring, their eyes pop open. The term is now gaining the popularity of *excellence* in the early 1980s or *equality* in the 1960s. Veteran reformer John Goodlad thinks that "we are rapidly moving toward the use of the word 'restructuring' whenever we talk about school reform at all. And if we have enough conferences on it, we'll assume that the schools have been restructured." But what does it signify?

The present is an intense and often contradictory phase in a long history of Americans tinkering toward utopia through reforming the schools. It is no accident that a *vague* word like restructuring has also become a *vague* word. "School restructuring has many of the characteristics of what political and organizational theorists call a 'garbage can,'" writes Richard F. Elmore, adding that "the theme of restructuring schools can accommodate a variety of conceptions about what is problematical about American education, as well as a variety of solutions."² Restructuring has become a general label for new strategies of school reform that respond to disillusionment with the results of state legislation of the middle 1980s that sought to mandate stiffer standards for students and teachers. The wall charts comparing the performance of states with each other and the United States with other nations seemed to show that top-down reform was not producing the dramatic changes reformers sought.

People regard restructuring as a synonym for the market mechanism of choice, or teacher professionalization and empowerment, or decentralization

and school site management, or involving parents more in their children's education, or national standards in curriculum with tests to match, or deregulation, or new forms of accountability, or basic changes in curriculum and instruction, or some or all of these in combination. Slogans suitable for bumper stickers proclaim the new dogmas: Choice is the answer; small is beautiful; blame the bureaucrats.

Proposals for restructuring in school governance go every which way, with people urging the troops to march in different directions. Consider these as examples:

President Bush and the Governors have recently called for "clear, national performance goals" and "detailed strategies" for reaching those targets. This moves toward something that would recently have been anathema—a national curriculum (it was not so long ago that over a hundred members of Congress voted to call the U.S. Commissioner of Education the Commissar of Education). One wonders how that ardent states rights advocate, Thomas Jefferson, might have reacted when they called their statement "A Jeffersonian Compact." With President Bush declaring that "the American people are ready for *radical* reforms," the Charlottesville fifty-one also called for "decentralization of authority and decision-making responsibility to the school site, so that educators are empowered to determine the means for accomplishing the goals and to be held accountable for accomplishing them."³

In 1986 the National Governors Association urged states to take over and run districts that failed to educate children, reflecting widespread distrust of a traditional bastion of local control, elected school boards. One state (New Jersey) has officially taken over all direction of a school district (Jersey City).⁴

Chicago, by contrast, bids fair to take us back to the kind of extreme decentralization in city school governance that was anathema to the professional elites of an earlier era. In 1904 in Philadelphia there were 545 members on the ward and central school boards—537 more than were needed to run an efficient system, thought the reformers of that time. Chicago today would make that system seem elitist, not populist; under the new reform law it has over 6,500 school board members and a complex network of central, middling, and ancillary authorities.⁵

Under the banner of choice, a number of reformers like William Bennett want to give parents and students a chance to choose their school at the same time that they want to curb if not eliminate choice of elective subjects to study. Such reforms could produce a national template for curriculum and a free market in schooling.⁶

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RESTRUCTURING THE BIG APPLE

As usual, New York City provides an interesting window on school reform. The new chancellor, Joseph A. Fernandez, arrived fresh from an exemplary attempt to restructure the Miami public schools, in part by negotiating school site management with the teachers' union. In New York, he found that neither centralization nor decentralization was working according to plan; it was not clear who had been in charge, if anyone. His office windows were dirty, so he called an engineer to clean them. Sorry, he learned, by contract the engineers cleaned windows only once a year. Asking his secretary to order highlighting pens, he was informed that delivery would take four weeks. Some of the thirty-two decentralized school boards were under investigation for corruption and incompetence, and Fernandez challenged their ability to appoint superintendents without his approval. He declared that he would take over schools that did not meet acceptable academic standards, and he negotiated a pact with the principals' union that enabled him to move ineffective principals, changing the policy that gave them a tenured fiefdom in a particular building.⁷

Far from being either an efficiently centralized system or a fully decentralized one, New York illustrates the baronies and "fragmented centralization" found in much educational governance today. The present system is a product of a history that shows in microcosm many of the issues I will examine in this article. In successive waves of attempted change in governance over the last century, New York reformers have sought to find the one best system for running their schools—to restructure them, in current lingo.

In 1893, Joseph M. Rice declared the city too large to be one district. He believed it should be divided into twenty separate ones. Elite reformers at the turn of the century disagreed: New York needed to abolish its ward boards, to centralize control in a small board, and delegate decision-making to an expert superintendent and specialists in the central office. In the 1930s some far-sighted educators like Leonard Covello tried to build community-based schools within the massive bureaucracy that was the New York system. In the 1960s, angered by the glacial pace of racial integration achieved by the central board of education, black activists called for community control of schools. They got not what they really wanted but the thirty-two "decentralized" districts that Fernandez now copes with. In the last thirty years, the federal and New York state legislatures enacted dozens of categorical programs and new mandates. These produced mid-level administrators at 110 Livingston Street to supervise, coordinate, or obscure the inconsistencies in these categorical programs; accounting to state and federal officials became a bureaucratic art form.⁸

This involuted history of attempted restructurings in New York City produced a complexity in decision making that only a Rubie Goldberg could understand, much less appreciate. Tired of the turmoil, a skeptical New York teacher had this to say about yet another restructuring: "School Reform

Again? (Sigh)."⁹

The New York system is, of course, a special case. In the 1960s the city had more educational administrators than all of France. But writ large in this biggest of U.S. cities is a set of historical changes that are worth exploring in more detail in a national context. This broader history suggests both the difficulty of fundamental change today, given the institutional legacy and vested interests created by earlier attempts to reorganize American public schools, and the importance of being clear about educational purposes. Many long-term historical trends in American public education have gone directly counter to reforms urged today.¹⁰

There are so many diagnoses and solutions and such varied actors who press for restructuring today, as Elmore says, that it is unlikely that schools will be fully transformed from standardized and externally regulated bureaucracies into a new model based on "school inquiry and problem solving, school autonomy, professional norms, and client choice." He points out that the political interests involved "cut across almost every major institutional, jurisdictional, and professional boundaries [*sic*] in education." Further, he detects inconsistency in the notion that

systemwide change will occur by lodging greater responsibility with people who work in schools. If this is really the central insight of school restructuring, then it seems contradictory to argue that all schools will or should change in the same way as a result of school restructuring, since to do so, schools would all have to arrive spontaneously at more or less the same solutions to highly complex problems of content, pedagogy, technology, organization, and governance. Lodging a high degree of discretion with schools is, in other words, inconsistent with broad uniform effects.¹¹

It is still possible, as Elmore argues, that an "adaptive realignment" may occur as leaders in states and school districts respond to critical social, economic, and educational problems.¹² The pressures are surely there: concerns about economic competitiveness, the failure to educate the children of the poor effectively, and worry about attracting and retaining good teachers. Although there is much hype in talk about restructuring schools, there is also hope if aims become more realistic and if different groups can work toward that common agenda. At the end of this article I will return to the present moment in education reform and comment on two current strategies: decentralizing authority and seeking to make the classroom a more lively and challenging workplace for teachers and students.

POLICY TALK AND TRENDS IN PRACTICE

To understand the history of education reform in the United States, waves of trendy talk need to be distinguished from long-term trends in institutional

development. Policy discourse may produce little change in the schools. On the other hand, trends in practice may go counter to popular rhetoric. Some reformers ride trends, others buck them.

Statistical trends—some of which I will present later—demonstrate that American public education has changed dramatically over the last century, although it is a common lament of reformers that little ever changes. The achievements of one generation of reformers have often become the targets of reformers in the next era of change. Such is the case today.

Reform periods in education are typically times when concerns about the state of the society or economy spill over into demands that the schools set things straight. The discovery of some problem—America losing in economic competition, the threat of Russian science, poverty, racial injustice, unassimilated immigrants—triggers such policy talk. Policymakers translate these anxieties and hopes into proposals for educational reform. These solutions are often very modest in scope compared with the crises they are expected to solve; home economics, for example, was supposed to halt the rising divorce rate and supposedly excessive ambitions of “the new woman” early in the twentieth century. Some reforms become enacted or adopted, and a few of them are even implemented. Often reforms pushed by outsiders—lay activists—have a short half-life in the schools, however, and concerns and policies tend to recycle in waves.¹³

Another kind of reform typically has had a more lasting impact on the schools: changes proposed by key decision makers within education. Such reforms in the past century have largely been justified on grounds of professionalism (for example, certification of teachers), science (IQ testing and tracking), and specialization of function leading to efficiency (the creation of new structures like the junior high school or new categories of employees).¹⁴

The history of education reform is a complex tale of open and cover politics, contending ideologies, tugs-of-war between decentralization and centralization, and tensions between teaching the “basics” and expanding the curriculum. Out of that past I select a few turning points to analyze what seem to me to be major reorganizations of schooling—times when reformers sought to restructure education, though they did not use that term and constructed reorganization in different ways. In looking at these reforms I concentrate on governance, school organization, and instruction, for these are key issues in what is today called restructuring. I also examine what the reformers meant by what today is called “accountability.”

As a starting point I begin with the late nineteenth century, a time when highly decentralized rural schools coexisted with what was perhaps the most centralized systems of instruction that have existed in the United States, the uniform urban school bureaucracies of that period.

In the years from about 1900 to 1950 a cohesive group of professional educators sought to “take the schools out of politics” and to reorganize them from

the top down to the bottom. They worked to consolidate school districts, to increase the size of schools, to diversify the curriculum, and to centralize control according to “scientific” expertise and new hierarchical patterns of authority.

In the late 1950s and 1960s new actors entered school politics to challenge this “closed system” of policymaking in education. Protest groups consisting of people who had lacked influence over education policy sought to make schools more responsive to social differences and social justice. In some communities activists demanded community control or new ethnically based programs such as bilingual education. Protest groups turned to allies in federal and state legislatures and to the courts to secure their rights or to create new categorical programs. As a result of the new politics of education, new entitlements and programs, regulations, and litigation, the older centralization of power in hierarchical local districts became fragmented.

The 1980s saw a swing in school reform to uniform state mandates. The conventional wisdom of that period was that the previous generation of school reform had resulted in educational mayhem, and this in turn had resulted in educational mediocrity. Back to basics, to required courses, to testing and upgrading of standards—these were the hallmarks of this attempt to reform schooling. These reforms immediately preceded the current interest in restructuring.¹⁵

If one looks only at policy talk, each wave of reform appears to wash over the schools only to be succeeded by another, often contradictory, set of policies. In fact, however, there were institutional trends that persisted through decades, congruent with some kinds of reform and contradictory to others. Since these trends have inexorably shaped the context for current attempts to restructure the schools, I examine these basic institutional trends before returning to the present moment in education reform.

THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY: PATTERNS OF DIVERSITY

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, American public education was highly decentralized, far more so than schools in any other nation. One reason was the dispersal of the population, which was mostly rural and educated in one-room schools. Another reason was a deep-rooted American distrust of centralized government, a fear that led citizens to write state constitutions that hobbled the powers of state governments. When states did try to control districts, citizens resisted state encroachment on local prerogatives. Control and funding of schools, with few exceptions, lay in the hands of local school trustees, who formed by far the largest group of elected officials in the United States, probably in the world. In 1890, state departments of education had an average of two employees, but close to a half-million local school trustees ran schools in their communities.¹⁶

Thus there was "school-based management" and community control to a degree unimaginable in today's schools. Local trustees and parents selected the teachers, supervised their work, and sometimes boarded them in their homes. The teacher's performance as reflected in the students' learning was visible to anyone who wanted to come to the frequent "exhibitions" (or public events, often held on Fridays, in which locals gathered to hear the children recite poems or compositions, give "declamations" on political or moral themes, and conduct spelling bees). Here accountability meant doing what the local community wanted. "Look with suspicion upon the teacher who tells you how he bosses the school board," observed a teacher in Kansas. "He is either a liar or a one-termer, and the probabilities are that he is both."¹⁷

Today the one-room rural school may seem a model of community-based education, but in the nineteenth century many career teachers regarded the rural school as a pedagogical slum, the urban system as a mecca. Rural schools paid meager salaries; teachers were typically young and paid youths' wages. Teachers' private lives as well as public performance were there for all to monitor. The demands of teaching all subjects to children of different ages strained even the most ingenious instructors. They had to improvise learning from whatever textbooks were available, to find ways to satisfy the conflicting tastes of their patrons (as the local citizens were called), and to devise their own systems of discipline and teaching. In the nineteenth century, educational leaders often wanted to consolidate one-room district schools and to turn them into graded schools on the urban model, but they did not succeed in large-scale consolidation of schools until well into the twentieth century.¹⁸

Urban schools of the latter half of the nineteenth century contrasted sharply with the decentralized rural schools. Cities paid teachers much more than did the rural communities, retained them much longer, and buffered them from community demands. Although the early city schools were rather haphazard in control and curriculum, leading urban superintendents managed to reorganize them into uniform, hierarchical systems. They prescribed the textbooks. They devised achievement tests covering the content of this curriculum. These tests determined promotion of pupils from grade to grade and supposedly calibrated the competence of teachers. Principals inspected teachers to make sure that they were toeing the line, like the pupils, and following the curriculum guide. Many cities had special normal (or teacher-training) divisions in their high schools to prepare young women to teach the city's course of study (including practice, in Washington, D.C., in prescribed exercises in "Yawning and Stretching" as a mid-morning ritual).¹⁹

This urban regime offered tightly controlled, orderly, standardized, direct instruction. Its institutional regime resembles the exam-driven, centralized curriculum and instruction characteristic of many nations today. Many educators at the turn of the twentieth century, however, thought this form of

schooling a pedagogical disaster. They pointed out that in some cities half the children were lumped in the first two grades: enormous numbers were "retarded" (held back in grade), and dropped out at the earliest opportunity—often in the fourth or fifth grade. This one-size-fits-all, rigid education, they believed, needed to be reorganized and differentiated.²⁰

"REORGANIZATION": TEMPLATE FOR REFORM, 1900-1950

The reformers of the period from 1900 to 1950 whom I call the "administrative progressives" were a group unified by similar training, interests, and values. They were the first generation of professional leaders educated in the new schools of education, men (there were few women in the group) who carved out lifelong careers in education as city superintendents, education professors, state officers, or foundation officials. They shared a common faith in "educational science" and in lifting education "above politics" so that experts could make the crucial decisions.²¹

The administrative progressives advocated innovations that would produce efficiency, equity (in their own definition), accountability, and expertise. They called their program of reform "reorganization," and during the years from 1900 to 1950 they were remarkably successful. Basically they did most of what they planned to do. Indeed, the momentum of many of their reforms continued during the thirty years after 1950, at a time when the older leadership of the administrative progressives was challenged by new actors in school politics.

By reorganization these leaders meant the opposite of what many people today mean by restructuring. They wanted to centralize control of urban schools in small, elite boards and to delegate decision making to experts; they thought that the old decentralized ward system of running schools was atavistic and corrupt. They worked successfully to consolidate small rural districts and to abolish one-room schools; they celebrated largeness, not smallness. They wanted to differentiate the curriculum to match the supposed differences of ability and economic destiny of students, not to give all students a solid grounding in academic subjects. They sought to create hierarchies of curriculum experts and supervisors to tell teachers what and how to teach, not to give them greater autonomy in the classroom, and they tried to replace the vagaries of local lay politics with the authority of educational science.²²

Although educational leaders talked about "taking the schools out of politics"—in itself a smart political strategy—they knew that they needed allies. In the early twentieth century, business and professional elites dominated school boards and took an active interest in reorganization. One of the reasons the administrative progressives were so effective was that their aims aligned with those of the power holders of the time. Then as now, businessmen were worried about international economic competition and wanted ef-

efficient schools to help Americans meet the challenge of a new industrial and commercial giant, Germany.²³

Supremely confident, the administrative progressives proclaimed that their reforms were in the national interest and in the interest of the schoolchildren. They tended to dismiss their opponents as ignorant or self-interested. They denounced decentralized urban ward boards of education as corrupt and meddling in professional matters. They regarded the rural foes of school consolidation as backward yokels who did not know what was good for their children. The big school was better because it permitted more differentiation of curriculum, and school boards and parents who did not recognize this were behind the times. Teachers who opposed guidance by expert administrators were unprofessional troublemakers.²⁴

Influential educators used their professional organizations to pressure state legislatures to consolidate and standardize schools and to impose new certification requirements for education professionals. One reason for their success was that educators seemed to speak with one voice about what reforms were needed—or at least there was substantial consensus among the administrators, who dominated the National Education Association (NEA). A symbiosis developed between university education schools and administrators, the new mandarins of education. New specialties generated new training programs; Teachers College, Columbia University, for example, prepared graduates for fifty-four different educational positions. Education barons placed their students in key superintendencies and then were invited to survey city school systems to measure how well they matched the new template of reorganization.²⁵

The new educational ideology of science and efficient management gave the appearance of turning educational policy into a process of rational planning. The administrative progressives believed that children had different abilities and destinies in life and that hence schools should be differentiated. They devised IQ tests to sort pupils and standardized achievement tests to measure what they learned. They gave different labels to students who did not fit their definition of "normal," and they created tracks and niches for them. Reorganization to these experts meant a place for every child and every child in his or her place.²⁶

The administrative progressives promised public *accountability* for their leadership, but it signified something quite different from its current meaning in the literature of restructuring. They mostly focused on structure and process, not results in academic learning, when they talked about accountability. They used many kinds of tests for internal management of students but they normally did not release test results to the public (that did not become common practice until the last generation).

By contrast, today many people say that in the restructured school teachers should be held responsible—that is, accountable—for *what* students learn but should have autonomy to decide *how* to accomplish that result. In this

version, the process of learning is deregulated, the product specified and monitored, usually by tests whose results become public.

If being accountable means never needing to say you are sorry, the administrative progressives demonstrated their virtue and forestalled criticism by collecting enormous amounts of data to illustrate responsible modern management. They promised fiscal accountability and calculated to the last penny the cost of a lesson in Latin or welding. They claimed to use the latest technologies of instruction. They documented enrollments and the adoption of new programs. The accountability of the educational system came not from assessing the results of instruction but from demonstrating conformity of the structure and processes of schooling with what the public was taught to think was standard and up-to-date, the correct institutional grammar of the modern school.²⁷

All in all, the restructuring of public schools that went by the name of "reorganization" produced clear institutional changes. Enrollments ballooned, schools grew larger and curricula more complex, the ranks of specialists swelled, numbers of districts sharply declined, and per-pupil funding rose steadily. The administrative progressives managed to persuade the public, by and large, to accept their notion of what was normal and desirable in education. The years from 1900 to 1950 have sometimes been labeled the golden age of the school superintendent, corroborated by political scientists of the 1950s who called local school districts "closed systems."

CHALLENGE IN THE 1960s: NEW ACTORS, PROGRAMS, PURPOSES

Beginning in the middle 1950s and growing in intensity and diversity in the 1960s, critics began to challenge some of the basic assumptions and achievements of the reorganization of schools during the previous half-century. Groups that had little voice in the old system demanded a role in decision making. The new politics of education undermined the status quo and modified old structures of power and school programs. As educators incorporated these changes into the existing system, however, no coherent new model of governance emerged. Indeed, the organizational responses to the new activists produced larger and more complex and fragmented bureaucracies.²⁸

The *Brown* desegregation decision and the civil rights movement were major catalysts of change. Militant blacks demonstrated that people who had been segregated and largely excluded from the old politics of education could influence a system that had relegated them to powerlessness. This message was not lost on groups like Hispanics, feminists, or parents of handicapped children.²⁹

Finding local systems of schools resistant to their demands, outsiders turned to higher levels of government—to state and federal legislatures and courts—for redress. One result was increased impact of federal and state

governments on a system in which decision making had remained largely a local prerogative well into the 1950s. Legislatures and courts provided legal leverage for a variety of reforms: racial desegregation, the attack on institutional sexism, new bilingual programs, the introduction of ethnic curricula, new attention to the needs of the handicapped, and the equalization of school finance.

Reformers in the 1960s demanded dispersion and decentralization of educational decision making as well as an increased role for federal and state governments. Indeed, state and federal legislation itself sometimes mandated greater parental involvement through school-community councils in educational programs financed by these levels of government. Militant blacks called for community control of schools in the vast urban ghettos. Largely as a result of pressures from disaffected students, school districts greatly expanded the number of electives and created alternative schools, storefront academies, schools within schools, and schools without walls. Such reforms gave greater choice to the students themselves. Activists attacked IQ testing and tracking, those familiar tools of the administrative progressives. Teachers demanded greater power over their work lives, achieved by unionization and by innovations such as teacher centers. Organizations like the NEA that once had joined administrators and teachers in one large if not always happy family split apart, the better to pursue their separate interests.³⁰

The result of the new politics of education in the 1960s was neither the decentralization characteristic of nineteenth-century schools nor the modest centralization at the state and district levels achieved by the administrative progressives. Instead, governance resembled what John Meyer calls "fragmented centralization." Put another way, everybody and nobody was in charge of public schooling in that tumultuous decade. The insiders—the educational leaders—lost their sense of control over schooling.³¹

Federal and state laws created dozens of new categorical programs such as Title (later Chapter) I, which sought to funnel resources to needy students, or Public Law 94-142, which prescribed ways to educate handicapped children. As in the case of vocational education—which since 1918 had developed its own bureaucratic apparatus at federal, state, and local levels—many of the new programs produced new specialists at each level charged with seeking and disbursing funds and overseeing the new programs. Often these new categorical programs were uncoordinated, and sometimes they conflicted with one another.

One result of such fragmented centralization was that accountability often became accounting, and school bureaucracies grew at a rate never before equaled. New mid-managers became accountants for new categorical programs, compartmentalized domains that linked local bureaucrats more to state and federal officials than to the local district. John Meyer suggests that in the face of possibly contradictory mandates and requirements, a sensible

strategy for school superintendents was calculated ignorance or incompetence rather than the masterful planning that was the aim of their predecessors.³²

The older faith in a science of education and universal solutions to educational problems did not disappear in the 1960s, however. Indeed, educational research was a growth industry in that decade. In particular, the number of evaluators expanded rapidly as government agencies demanded that someone assess the success of reforms. As a new version of accountability, much early evaluation was based on a rational model of planning and implementation—calibrating how well practice matched design. Sophisticated scholars soon concluded, however, that evaluation, like education itself, is a complex social and political process fraught with assumptions and interests ignored by the rational model.³³

Indeed, as definitions of equity and efficiency changed, accountability became a cloak of many colors. One concept of accountability was responsiveness to the many protest groups that demanded attention to their agendas. This might take the form of introducing black history, for example, or appointing a Title IX coordinator to correct gender injustices. Accountability also became compliance with legal mandates resulting from the expansion of litigation in education, for districts had to respond to court-ordered desegregation, protection of procedural rights for students and teachers, and abandonment of prayers and Bible reading. Still another kind of accountability consisted of offering students more choices, as in electives or alternative schools, though this was considered by many people an abdication of educational responsibility.

THE 1980s: BACK TO BASICS, REFORM FROM THE TOP DOWN

By the 1980s a popular diagnosis of crisis in education was that educational ferment in the previous generation had disrupted learning. The decline in educational achievement, in turn, had endangered the nation's competitiveness in a tough world. Test scores, both across the years in the United States and in international comparisons, constituted the chief evidence for decay in schooling. The key reform report of the 1980s—*A Nation at Risk* (1983)—proclaimed rigor as the remedy—or, as a state legislator put it, "we need to make the little buggers [students] work harder."³⁴

If anyone wanted proof that evaluation had broader social and political causes and consequences, the use of test scores in this period gave dramatic evidence. Made public, such standardized tests purported to measure what American students were learning. Policymakers came to regard tests as the chief measure of accountability. The message they gave was not reassuring: In absolute terms, students did not know as much as people thought they should, as students did in many other nations, or as they imagined American

youth did in the golden age of the past; in relative terms, the situation seemed to be getting worse.³⁵

This time the initiative in reform did not come from protest groups or academics or educators or foundations, the people who had pressed the innovations of the 1960s. Rather, the new activists were people who had often been on the sidelines during that period: state governors and legislators and business organizations. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when retrenchment had been the order of the day, state politicians took little interest in the schools (who wanted to be associated with decline?). The rhetoric of crisis in *A Nation at Risk*, amplified by the media and federal spokespeople, linked prosperity to learning—albeit in somewhat questionable ways—and made education once again a public priority. The Reagan administration did not want to spend more federal money on schools. Instead, William Bennett used his bully pulpit as secretary of education to chastise and cheer.³⁶

The legislative action was in the states. Following the lead of *A Nation at Risk*, and sometimes anticipating it, almost all the states increased graduation requirements by specifying more academic courses in fields like English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Concurrently, states often raised requirements for admission to state colleges and universities. Many introduced or intensified standardized testing programs, sometimes specifying that they should be used to determine promotion or graduation. Twenty-seven legislatures set a minimum grade-point average for beginning teachers; forty-six required some kind of test for certification; many developed requirements for evaluating teachers; and some passed merit pay, career ladder, or mentor teacher programs—all designed to reward outstanding teachers.³⁷

California illustrates how one state sought to increase academic rigor. In 1968 there were only three course requirements for graduation: American history, American government, and physical education. Essentially districts had a free hand in curriculum and instruction. In 1983 the legislature passed a law requiring students to take thirteen courses. The state department of education developed a more detailed and prescriptive course of study, prescribed textbook publishers to intensify academic content and to stress "higher order thinking," sought to align instruction with the new state framework, and developed statewide tests geared to the new curriculum.³⁸

State reformers wanted to undo the curricular *laissez-faire* of the 1960s—the expansion of elective courses, for example—and to impose new requirements from the top down on teachers and students. Reformers insisted that their goal was to intensify—restore?—the traditional academic side of learning, but the means they chose—state mandates—did tilt governance strongly toward centralization. By the mid-1980s there was a new consensus on what accountability meant: results in learning, largely measured by test scores. This shift in the meaning of accountability was a fundamental, not an incre-

mental, change in educational policy and practice that together with centralized state mandates and a growing interest in federal standards for learning might be considered a basic shift in educational policy. Implicit in all this was a transfer of power to a set of experts located in private organizations—the testers—who, like textbook corporations, were not directly accountable to democratic decision making.³⁹

It is still much too early to judge the impact of the state-imposed reforms of the mid-1980s, but by the end of the decade policymakers were already pointing anxiously at the numbers on wall charts of statistics of achievement that compared the states with one another and the United States with other nations. As leaders examined these Dow-Jones indices of scholastic achievement, some of them began to wonder if top-down state reforms were really producing the results they expected.⁴⁰

Today many people believe that effective reform must restructure education, not simply issue new orders from the top in the dream of restoring some imagined era of academic virtue. As I have mentioned, advocates of restructuring often call for greater decentralization in governance, more autonomy for teachers and collegial decision making, more attention to the difficult tasks of getting students to think and demonstrate their competence, more parental involvement, smaller schools, and much more. Periodically in the last century reformers have advanced quite similar proposals. In assessing the chances of success and the wisdom of such reforms today, however, it is helpful first to look at persistent institutional trends in public schools over many decades.

LONG-TERM STRUCTURAL TRENDS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For over a century, Americans have used statistics to demonstrate social crises and to justify educational remedies. Reformers have publicized crime rates, the influx of immigrants, numbers of child laborers, health problems, drug consumption, and declining test scores in order to advance their particular agendas. Much less often has policy talk about reform been compared with secular trends in schooling that may reveal what has happened over the long term, the institutional context within which proposals must be implemented. If one looks at such long-term trends rather than at waves of policy talk (usually called periods of reform), the development of American schools looks much more linear and consistent than changes in rhetoric might suggest—and the direction of these statistics goes counter to major tenets of restructuring today.

Consider first the notion that the control of schools should be decentralized and lay people should be involved more. The major historical trends have moved in the opposite direction. By eliminating small school districts and their local trustees—reducing the number of districts from nearly 130,000 in

1931 to fewer than 16,000 in 1987—reformers of the past decimated the number of school trustees, thereby erasing in those communities the major form of lay input in educational decision making. In addition, early in the twentieth century the administrative progressives succeeded in nearly eliminating ward-based school boards in cities and reduced the average size of central boards from 21 to 7.⁴¹

There has been much more talk about decentralization of urban schools in the last three decades than real changes in practice. In 1980 Allan C. Ornstein found that over half of the largest cities *claimed* that they had decentralized their schools, but when he checked again in 1988 only one-quarter said that they were decentralized. On closer inspection, even these cities looked dubious. When Ornstein compared the numbers of administrators in the central office with those in outlying offices, only two of these supposedly decentralized cities (New York and St. Louis) had more administrators outside than inside the central office. Some had ten to twenty times more administrators in the central office. Decentralization often turns out to be little more than another layer of bureaucracy, with little of the public involvement that is commonly attributed to decentralized governance.⁴²

Second, today reformers want to create schools on a smaller, more intimate scale, but the number of students per school has jumped more than sixfold in the last half-century. The one-room school has become a vanishing breed, dropping from over 150,000 in 1930 to fewer than 1,000 today. Early in the twentieth century the model high school had perhaps 100 students, but by 1986 over half enrolled more than 1,000 students. The total number of high schools remained fairly constant—at about 24,000—between 1930 and 1980 while the number of high school graduates jumped in those years from 592,000 to 2,748,000. Until recently, most educators agreed that larger high schools were superior to small. Reformers today who want smaller, more personal environments must create them in much bigger buildings—hardly impossible, but not easy either.⁴³

Third, some reformers today want to restructure curriculum and instruction so that students will focus on fewer subjects and treat them in greater depth. This goes against the grain of almost a century of differentiation of curriculum to fit the supposed abilities and later destinies of students, especially at the secondary level. The number of subjects and tracks vastly multiplied between 1900 and 1950. During the late 1960s demands for electives and alternative forms of schooling (including ethnic curricula) further expanded the course of study. Since the state reforms of the 1980s there has been some drop in enrollments in fields like vocational education and the arts, but the curriculum is still highly diverse, and tracking—obvious or covert—is still very common.⁴⁴

Fourth, reformers now want to pare down middle management, regulation, and paperwork, but these have been growth industries. Getting rid of

administrators has proved to be easier to propose than to accomplish; even during the time of retrenchment in the late 1970s, far more teachers were dropped, proportionately, than administrators. Accurate numbers on middle management are notoriously hard to find, but it appears that the number of middle managers in school districts more than doubled in the last forty years, much of it a result of fragmented centralization. There was one central office administrator for 746 pupils in 1950 and one for 520 in 1980. Handling the new paperwork empires were secretaries and clerical workers, who increased from 31,824 in 1950 to 223,647 in 1980. In 1890 there was, on average, one staff member in state departments of education for every 100,000 pupils, in 1974 one for about every 2,000. Regulations have ballooned: In California the state education code took about 200 pages in 1900 in 1985 more than 2,600.⁴⁵

Fifth, reformers now argue that teachers are the heart of the education enterprise. They should have autonomy to make decisions. Funding should focus on their work. In recent decades, however, the growth of principals and nonteaching staff has far outpaced the relative growth of teachers. The word *principal* used to mean "principal teacher," and in the early decades of the twentieth century the principal was also a teacher in most schools, except in the larger cities. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, as schools grew larger, the job typically became a full-time administrative position. In 1946 fewer than one-quarter of schools had a principal; by 1980 there was more than one principal in all schools. In 1950 teachers constituted 70 percent of all staff employed per school, but in 1986 they were only 53 percent of the total, for other instructional and support staff increased markedly. There was one adult school employee for every 19 students in 1950, one for 9 in 1986; during this period the pupil-teacher ratio dropped much less (though still substantially, from 27 to 18).⁴⁶

One way of interpreting the disparity among these five sets of long-term trends and some of the current proposals for restructuring is to regard the trends as evidence of the need for radical change, to say that the direction education has taken is fundamentally wrong, as shown by the present presumably critical failings of public schooling. Hence restructuring is mandatory. A counter argument would cast doubt on the possibility of basic change, given the way trends have persisted despite many vigorous attempts to alter the fundamental character of schooling in the past.

EDUCATION REFORM TODAY

I suggest that neither stance—the cheerleader for change or the wet-blanket approach—really captures the most appropriate uses of history in policy analysis. History is better suited to posing issues for decision makers to consider than providing set answers. Restructuring means so many things I can-

not comment on all its ramifications. Let me focus on two facets of the movement, one structural and the other pedagogical: decentralization of authority and making the classroom a lively and challenging workplace for teachers and students.

First, then, let us consider the issue of centralization versus decentralization in education decision making. Perhaps the key question for reformers is to decide what decisions can best be made through relatively centralized or relatively decentralized decision-making structures. It is apparent that there is no easy way to characterize the governance of U.S. schools as either centralized or decentralized—the web of interactive relationships is far too complex for that. It is easy to bash bureaucrats, but in experiments in restructuring school districts superintendents and principals have proven to be key leaders.⁴⁷

There has been much ebb and flow in talk about centralization/decentralization. In practice, however, history reveals a steady growth in state and then federal regulation, the size of districts, and the number of administrative staff. The administrative progressives set the ball of centralization rolling in the early twentieth century; the trend accelerated partly because it matched what was happening in other social, economic, and political institutions. In the 1960s federal and state categorical programs and litigation produced fragmentation in governance that greatly expanded administration and regulation. New state mandates of the 1980s centralized control of schools at the state level.

Decentralization and deregulation, by contrast, are remedies that appeal now to reformers across the political spectrum. Some of this discourse is populist or corporate rhetoric, some of it carefully reasoned strategies for change. With ritualistic regularity Americans have created and then bemoaned bureaucracies. A common pattern in the 1960s, for example, was to identify some problem and then designate an administrator to take care of it. Americans have also been ambivalent about regulations, often deciding that "there ought to be a law," then grousing about red tape.

Bureaucracies and regulations are not simply perverse and malign growths. In their origins they usually seemed reasonable responses to perceived problems. Much of the growth in nonteaching staff, for example, resulted from a conscientious desire to provide children with services—nutrition, day care, transportation, libraries, and counseling—that otherwise would have been absent. Today, indeed, some reformers talk about locating more, not fewer, social services in the schools, which would mean adding more nonteaching staff.

Regulation in American education has often aimed at correcting serious inequities such as segregation of blacks or neglect of disabled or immigrant children. Wholesale deregulation has the potential of reintroducing social injustices. As Americans have learned painfully in the savings and loan fiasco of the Reagan years, deregulation can have its not-so-hidden costs.

School governance will continue to be an uneasy and shifting balance between centralized and decentralized control, but the two modes of decision making are not equally appropriate for all tasks. Equalizing school funding or securing civil rights, for example, has demanded considerable centralization. To the degree that school governance is now characterized by fragmented centralization, we may have the worst of both worlds: many accountants to higher state and federal authorities but few people really accountable to students or parents. Eliminating overlapping jurisdictions and unnecessary paperwork may require both more centralization and more decentralization, depending on the particular function.

If one looks at the second issue I raised—reforms designed to make the classroom a livelier and more challenging workplace for teachers and students—I think it is fair to say that pushing changes in pedagogy from above has a spotty and largely disappointing history. The most clear-cut example was the autocratic regime of nineteenth-century urban schools described above; teachers were simply told what to do and policed to see that they did it. Improving classroom instruction—the most important kind of reform, especially in poor and minority communities—has typically succeeded best when teachers were active partners in the process, and this is the key, I believe, to decentralized strategies of change.

Some of the most articulate advocates of restructuring call now for professionalizing teaching and decentralizing instructional decision making in individual schools. They seek to attract capable teachers, give them more autonomy and more chance to experiment along with colleagues, and enable them to respond effectively to their students. It is important not to start with an *a priori* notion of what professionalism is or to assume that teachers are hankering to run everything in schools. As Susan Moore Johnson has shown, teachers have typically rejected schemes like merit pay or career ladders because they fostered competition among teachers. Many have also objected to forms of school governance that placed an organizational overload on them. The goal of delegating decision making about classroom instruction to teachers does, however, hold the promise of matching school reforms to the aspirations and needs of teachers and their students. There are hopeful models of such change evident today, as in the Central Park East Schools of New York City.⁴⁸

Enabling teachers to do their job better by giving them the autonomy and resources to create lively learning is quite different from traditional reform patterns of adding a new program to an existing structure. It is fundamentally an idea that needs to be developed by those who carry it out. Such reforms have historically been the most difficult to bring about. There is far more talk about restructuring teaching than action to bring it about. One point seems clear: The notion that reforms in instruction should be or can be permanent ignores historical experience and violates the principle that teachers should have the autonomy to adapt ways of learning to their students. And if teach-

ers are really to be free to experiment, they may also fail, as do doctors or politicians.

Progress in improving classroom instruction will come slowly and in small and perhaps temporary increments, I suspect, not in millennial bursts. Larry Cuban's historical study *How Teachers Taught* should make us wary of expecting rapid or permanent changes. As he says, various winds of reform have ruffled the surface of the educational sea, but a fathom deep, in the classroom practices remained remarkably consistent over time. Teachers have become experts in accommodating to, deflecting, or sabotaging changes they do not desire.⁴⁹

When teachers do buy into reforms, however, when they make them their own, the experience can energize them and their students. This kind of change is hard to set in concrete; some reforms in classroom learning have had a short, happy life. An example is the Eight-Year study of the 1930s. In that experiment, teachers in thirty secondary schools reorganized curriculum and instruction along progressive lines, free of college entrance requirements. By most accounts, students found learning an exciting experience in high school and also performed better in higher education than a comparison group educated in more traditional ways. A decade or so after the reforms were evaluated, however, a researcher found that "little remained of the experimental programs."⁵⁰

No magic wand of restructuring can set things permanently straight. We will always have waves of education reform that seek to alter the substantial structures we have built, for values differ, interests conflict, generational perspectives change. For the last century Americans have been constantly tinkering toward utopia in school reform. It has been our way of creating the future that we want.

Notes

- 1 John I. Goodlad quoted in Lynn Olson, "The 'Restructuring' Puzzle: Ideas for Revamping 'Egg-Crate' Schools Abound, but to What Ends?" *Education Week*, November 2, 1988, p. 7.
- 2 Richard F. Elmore and Associates, *Restructuring Schools: The Next Generation of Educational Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 4; and William A. Firestone, Susan H. Fuhrman, and Michael W. Kirst, *The Progress of Reform: An Appraisal of State Education Initiatives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Policy Research in Education, 1989), pp. 10, 13. Michael Kirst observes that restructuring is "almost a Rorschach test. It's all in the eye of the beholder" (quoted in Olson, "Restructuring Puzzle," p. 7); see also "Cavazos Issues 'Terrible' Report on U.S. Schools," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1990, p. A3.
- 3 *New York Times*, October 1, 1989, Section 4, pp. 1, 22 (emphasis added to *radical*).
- 4 Michael W. Kirst, "Who Should Control Our Schools: Reassessing Current Policies," Center for Educational Research at Stanford, School of Education, Stanford University, 1988; reported in *New York Times*, March 23, 1990, p. A-9.
- 5 Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Stephen K. Clements, "Reconnoitering Chicago's Reform Efforts: Some Early Impressions," Occasional Paper, Joyce Foundation, July 1988; and Herbert J. Walberg et al., "Reconstructing the Nation's Worst Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 70 (June 1989): 802-05.

- 6 William Bennett, *American Education: Making It Work* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988).
- 7 On Miami's experiment, see Jane L. David, "Restructuring in Progress: Lessons from Pioneering Districts," in Elmore, *Restructuring*, pp. 212-15; *New York Times*, January 6, 1990, pp. A-1, 16; January 19, 1990, A-16; March 9, 1990, A-1, 16.
- 8 Joseph M. Rice, *The Public School System of the United States* (New York: Century, 1893); Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Leonard Covello, *The Heart Is the Teacher* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958); and David Rogers, *110 Livingston Street* (New York: Random House, 1966).

- 9 Julius Gordon, "School Reform Again? (Sigh)," *New York Times*, January 29, 1990, p. A-19.
- 10 In thinking about these issues I am indebted to a penetrating essay by David K. Cohen, "Governance and Instruction: The Promise of Decentralization and Choice" (essay for May 1989 conference sponsored by the LaFollette Institute of Public Policy at the University of Wisconsin, Madison).
- 11 Elmore, *Restructuring*, pp. 290-92.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 2-3, 293. Jane L. David writes that "the goals of restructuring are to decentralize authority, create more professional workplaces, and focus resources on teaching and learning" ("Restructuring in Progress," p. 211).

- 13 Larry Cuban, "Reforming Again, Again, and Again," *Educational Researcher* 19 (1990): 3-13; Thomas James and David Tyack, "Learning from Past Efforts to Reform the High School," *Phi Delta Kappan* 64 (1983): 400-06; Thomas S. Popkewitz, "Educational Reform: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Social Interest," *Educational Theory* 38 (1988): 77-93; and Michael W. Kirst and Gail Meister, "Turbulence in American Secondary Schools: What Reforms Last?" *Curriculum Inquiry* 15 (1985): 169-86.
- 14 David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), Part II.
- 15 Michael W. Kirst, "Recent State Education Reform in the United States: Looking Backward and Forward," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 24 (1988): 319-28.
- 16 David Tyack, Thomas James, and Aaron Benavot, *Law and the Shaping of Public Education, 1783-1954* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), chs. 2-3.
- 17 Marion G. Kirkpatrick, *The Rural School from Within* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1917), pp. 39-40; and Wayne E. Fuller, *The Old Country School: The Story of Rural Education in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- 18 David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Part 1.
- 19 John D. Philbrick, *School Systems in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1885); pictures of "yawning and stretching" in Frances Benjamin Johnston photograph collection in the Library of Congress.

- 20 Leonard P. Ayres, *Laggards in Our Schools: A Study of Retardation and Elimination in City School Systems* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1909).
- 21 Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, Part 2.
- 22 George D. Strayer, "Progress in City School Administration during the Past Twenty-five Years," *School and Society* 32 (1930): 325-45.
- 23 Tyack, *One Best System*, Part 4.
- 24 For the views of one fascinating "troublemaker," see Margaret Haley, "Why Teachers Should Organize," in National Education Association, *Addresses and Proceedings, 1904*, pp. 145-52.
- 25 Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, Part 2.
- 26 Larry Cuban and David Tyack, "March and Mismatch"—Schools and Children Who Don't Fit Them," in *Accelerated Schools*, ed. Henry Levin (Falmer Press, forthcoming).
- 27 Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1977): 340-63.

28 Edith Mosher, Anne H. Hastings, and Jennings Wagoner, Jr., *Pursuing Equal Educational Opportunity: The New Activists* (New York: ERIC Clearing House on Urban Education, 1979).

29 Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); and David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Public Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), ch. 9.

30 Henry Levin, ed., *Community Control of Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1970).

31 John W. Meyer, "The Impact of the Centralization of Educational Funding and Control of State and Local Educational Governance" (Stanford: Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University, 1980); and idem, W. Richard Scott, and David Strang, "Centralization, Fragmentation, District Complexity," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 32 (1987): 186-201.

32 Meyer, "Centralization," pp. 6, 17.

33 Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, "Learning from Experience: Lessons from Policy Implementation," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 9 (1987): 171-78.

34 Kirst, "Recent State Education Reform," p. 320.

35 Myths abounded about how much students had learned in the golden age of the past, but it is exceedingly difficult to compare past and present achievement. Despite the widespread use of standardized achievement tests in schools since the early 1920s, the results were generally not made public but instead were kept within the bureaucracy for internal decision making.

36 For the political agenda and media blitz behind *A Nation at Risk*, see Peter S. Hlebowitsh, "Playing Power Politics: How *A Nation at Risk* Achieved Its National Stature," *Journal of Research and Development in Education* 23 (1990): 82-88; and Lorraine M. McDonald and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Education Policy and the Role of the States* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1982).

37 Firestone, Fuhrman, and Kirst, *Progress of Reform*.

38 Ibid, ch. 2.

39 Cohen, "Governance and Instruction," *New York Times*, March 21, 1990, p. B7.

40 "Cavazos Issues 'Terrible' Report on U.S. Schools," p. A3.

41 National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1988* (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 1988), Table 67; and Tyack, *One Best System*, Part 4.

42 Allan C. Ornstein, "Centralization and Decentralization of Large Public School Districts," *Urban Education* 24 (1989): 233-35; in New York, the voter turnout in elections for district school boards is typically minuscule.

43 NCES, *Digest, 1988*, Table 67.

44 John Francis Latimer, *What's Happened to Our High Schools?* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1958); and Firestone, Fuhrman, and Kirst, *Progress of Reform*, pp. 23-26.

45 NCES, *Digest, 1988*, Table 61; and John W. Meyer et. al., *Bureaucratization without Centralization: Changes in the Organizational System of American Public Education, 1940-1980*, Project Report No. 85-A11 (Stanford: Institute for Finance and Governance, Stanford University, 1985), Table 1. I am indebted to Jane Hannaway for the information on the California Code.

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Timar points out that state mandates and regulations often stymie local efforts at restructuring—see "The Politics of School Restructuring," *Pitt Delta Kappa*, December 1989, pp. 265-75.

49 Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980* (New York: Longman, 1984).

50 Wilford M. Aiken, *The Story of the Eight-Year Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1942); and Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. 256, n.6.